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Private Property: Charles Brockden Brown's Gendered Economics of Virtue.

By ELIZABETH JANE WALL HINDS.

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Charles Brockden Brown's fiction, Hinds argues, epitomizes the dramatic changes facing Americans during the 1790s, changes embodied by the shift in American economic life from a land-based economy, dependent on patronage and characterized by vertical power relations, to an economy dependent upon trade, paper money, and credit, and characterized by relatively horizontal power relations. Brown's "economics" encompass dealings in money as well as property and other material goods, and, in a broad sense, information. Houses symbolize this changing economy, enabling Brown to transform the gothic tradition in interesting ways; Hinds explains, "Paradoxically safe and threatening, Brown's private properties structurally replicate a changing market economy outside the household, an economy both removed from and intimately connected with their domestic economies" (10). She concludes that "Brown transforms the gothic genre by registering the gothic's traditional domestic terror as an object lesson in economic dependency and the work ethic, and in so doing participates in formulating an ideology in process of change from classical republican to a new, market economy" (20). Gender factors into this changing economy, of course, and Hinds challenges Brown's critical reputation as a feminist, arguing "Brown's women look much the same as Brown's men when studied as free and equal political citizens, yet when their economic conditions are measured against those of Brown's male characters, the differences revealed speak . . . to a contradictory set of social attitudes on the part of their author along with different prescriptions for economic, social, and personal success" (13).

Specifically, then, the virtue of Brown's respective characters is tested in different venues—women's virtue is measured by their role as domestic economists in homes that maintain only the illusion of privacy from the public world of business and finance, while men's virtue is tested via their ability to adapt to the confusing pub-

lic world of commerce. To explore these issues, *Private Property* considers Brown's four major novels—*Arthur Mervyn*, *Edgar Huntly*, *Ormond*, and *Wieland*—and, to a lesser extent, “Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist,” “The Man at Home,” and “Alcuin.” *Ormond* is the cornerstone for Hinds's discussion of gender issues; she argues that Constantia Dudley “earns” herself a home through her virtuous domestic labor—her ability to economize her domestic life. On the other hand, Clara Wieland loses her home precisely because she fails to exercise these same domestic virtues and instead occupies herself with leisure pursuits both “aristocratic” and masculine, such as reading, writing, and play-acting. While Constantia's ultimate independence, then, is predicated upon her very domesticity, Clara lacks feminine domestic virtue and consequently loses her independence, becoming the emotionally dependent wife of Pleyel.

By way of contrast, Hinds postulates, masculine virtue in Brown's view is necessarily a *public* virtue, dependent upon the successful administration of benevolence. Hinds explores this claim convincingly in her chapters on *Arthur Mervyn* and *Edgar Huntly*, arguing about the former, “Arthur . . . embodies all the features of fluctuating financial sensibilities in the late eighteenth century” (68). Untroubled by the moral ambiguities of Mervyn's actions, Hinds reads his character as innately virtuous and benevolent, but nonetheless calculating. “What Arthur gains,” Hinds explains, “is the experience necessary to convert his natural propensity for benevolence into exchangeable currency. His virtue, then, joins forces with a will-to-wealth to the end of a specifically capitalist success” (69). In an original reading of this book vis-à-vis Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Hinds argues that Mervyn successfully manipulates what she calls the “specter” . . . a useful term for the indwelling, ghostly image of public approval for the early capitalist citizen: this representation manufactures a public self for the individual, acting as a mirror both of the public world—with its ordinances and reputations; in short, with its system of credit and credibility—and of the individual subject measured within and against that public arena” (72). Thus for Brown, masculine virtue is not merely exercised—it is *performed*, and this performance itself is crucial for success in public, commercial life. Further, Mervyn's narrative skill—necessary to convince others of the justice and benevolence of his actions—becomes in a sense his capital, as he must gauge the standards of his listeners in order to produce a persuasive version of his story. Hinds persuasively relates Mervyn's story-telling to Brown's own situation, concluding, “For Brown, trying to make it in a new capitalist economy that had not yet made room for the class category ‘successful author,’ Arthur must have achieved a mighty coup, telling his stories for financial and social gain, without so much as one outright fiction. . . . Thus, poetically, Arthur's script becomes Arthur's scrip, punning Adam Smith's capitalist ‘man within’ into an authorial class category that was, in the 1790s, just about to be born” (82).

The chapter on *Edgar Huntly*, a version of which appeared in this journal, considers this novel in the tradition of the revenge tragedy, a genre which Hinds argues appears during precisely the type of social and economic upheaval such as occurred in post-Revolutionary America. Utterly dependent upon land-based inheritance, Huntly never strives to make his own fortune, unlike Arthur Mervyn. Bitter about his progressive disinheritances, Huntly seeks revenge, but revenge cannot return

what he never truly possessed. Huntly longs for an Old World economic system of landed inheritance supported by a system of patronage, a system which Hinds labels as "incompatible with capitalist goals" (144). Huntly's "patronage" seems suspiciously close to Mervyn's "benevolence," and indeed the line drawn between the two is a fine one. The distinction between them can best be explained this way: Mervyn practices benevolence as a successful form of exchange with people of both higher and lower economic status, whereas Huntly's patronage is a limited form of benevolence practiced exclusively upon those he views as his inferiors. Ironically, Huntly's attempt to patronize the despondent Clithero Edny furthers his own disinheritance, as his misplaced benevolence enables Clithero's vengeance upon Huntly's own potential patrons, Sarsefield and his wife, herself the former patron of Clithero.

Throughout *Private Property*, Hinds reveals her thorough knowledge of scholarship on Brown, as well as on eighteenth-century economic and social history; she draws expertly upon the work of such scholars as Jürgen Habermas, Gordon Wood, Joyce Appleby, Nancy Cott, Linda K. Kerber, and others. Although I found her chapter on *Edgar Huntly* to be the strongest, her reading of *Arthur Mervyn* alongside Smith's political theory is particularly fresh and provocative. I wish that other chapters of *Private Property* read Brown's novels alongside contemporaneous writers on economics and gender, rather than merely theorizing about these issues via other literary critics and historians.

Hinds concludes her study with a very brief coda to her chapter on *Edgar Huntly*. A concluding chapter, perhaps discussing the economic practices revealed in Brown's lesser-known novels, or suggesting ways to extend her readings of Brown's fictional economics to his other writings, would have nicely tied together her study. Despite these qualms, *Private Property* is essential reading for the scholar interested in Charles Brockden Brown or the relationships among economics, gender, and virtue in the post-Revolutionary era.